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SUBJECT: HIGHWAY THREATENS ENDANGERED LEOPARD HABITAT

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[1](#)C. 07 VLADIVOSTOK 124

[1](#)1. Last weekend, CG paid a visit to the World Wildlife Fund's "Leopard House," a visitors' center dedicated to educating residents and tourists about the plight of the Amur leopard, the world's rarest big cat and one of the most endangered animals overall (reftels). The center, located in the hamlet of Barabash, in the extreme southwestern corner of Russia's Primorye region, is headed by the environmentalist Tatyana Belikova. She said that although only some thirty leopards remain in the wild, she remains optimistic about their survival.

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A Highway Runs Through It  
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[1](#)2. The single biggest challenge they now face is the construction of a new six-lane highway right through the middle of the leopards' last remaining habitat. Belikova, WWF, and other environmental organizations have been lobbying for the creation of a series of tunnels and bridges that will allow leopards and other wildlife to cross the highway without risking being run over. If the leopards are not able to safely cross the highway, she said, they risk being confined to a territory too small to support even their current tiny population. Any decrease in the number of leopards will almost certainly result in a fatal reduction of their genetic diversity, which is already showing serious signs of strain brought about by inbreeding.

[1](#)3. Although the company building the highway has promised to construct at least one tunnel for wildlife, Belikova, citing the Russian proverb, "Promises don't mean there will be a wedding," remains skeptical that the government has the political will to make allowances and financial sacrifices on the leopards' behalf. Even if the one tunnel is built, she said, it remains seriously inadequate to effectively link the two halves the leopards' territory. She said that in "civilized countries" they are making tunnels for frogs. "If they do that for frogs, why not for the last few leopards?" she asked. "The Administration should show the world that this is a civilized place too."

[1](#)4. Leopards, which weigh some 80 kilograms, also face a threat from the region's much larger feline predator, the Amur tiger, which can weigh up to 300 kilograms. Recent news accounts have detailed several attacks made by tigers on leopards. Belikova said, however, that the leopards can deal with this natural threat if they have a healthy habitat. Indeed, WWF officials told us that increasing tiger attacks on leopards are due in part to human pressures on tiger habitat further north, which is pushing the animals southward into the leopards' range. Belikova notes that leopards do not attack humans unless they feel cornered.

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Educating the Next Generation  
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[1](#)5. Belikova says that although she is "hoping for a miracle, we may have to help God and make the miracle ourselves." In addition to worrying about near-term problems such as the

highway, Belikova spends much of her time working on the long-term environmental health of the region by concentrating on outreach and educational programs for children. The Leopard House staff say that educating children is an effective way to reach not just the children, but their friends and families. A WWF staff member told us that parents may find it difficult to ignore a child who asks why the leopards are perishing. One student was proud to have shown one of WWF's educational videos on the leopards to 120 other people. The WWF has taken efforts to translate many of their films to make them accessible to non-Russians; others have no text and require no translation. In addition to the videos, Belikova introduces educational themes through art projects and nature hikes. WWF also helps put on Tiger and Leopard Days in some RFE cities to raise awareness and create a constituency for environmental issues.

16. The scarcity of the Amur leopard is indicated by the fact that Belikova, an environmentalist and lifelong resident of the Barabash area, has herself never seen one in the wild. Nevertheless, she can recall the details of many sightings by other residents. Most of the leopard footage in the WWF films is in fact captured by hidden cameras in areas where the animals are known to frequent. (The filmmakers told us they are careful not to reveal these locations to others.) Belikova jokes that one leopard has become a "movie star" because he has appeared in all of the WWF videos. One of the most touching scenes in the films occurs when a leopard cub discovers a hidden camera, and spends time close up investigating and pawing it.

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Cross-Border Collaboration Essential for Survival  
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17. The survival of the leopards faces serious challenges: from the highway, from poaching, from the destruction of habitat due to logging, from inbreeding, and from human encroachment. Nevertheless, there have been some encouraging signs. One of these has been the greater contact between Russian and Chinese environmental groups in the past few years. A number of Russian environmentalists have visited China recently, where they say real strides are being made in preserving habitat. According to Dale Miquelle, who heads the Primorye office of the Wildlife Conservation Society, the thin band of forest on the Chinese side of the border used to be a "dead zone," with no signs of life in evidence -- not even a single bird chirp. With stiffer penalties on poaching and more consistent patrolling, however, there are signs that wildlife is reestablishing itself in the area. Miquelle notes, however, that the forested zone along the border is very narrow and not in and of itself capable of sustaining a leopard population. For this reason, cooperation between Russian and Chinese officials is essential to provide the leopard with enough range to improve its chances for survival. A group of Chinese nature reserve specialists are coming to Primorye to discuss conservation issues this summer.

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